

# ANTHROPOLOGY AS AN INSPIRATION TO FOOD STUDIES: BUILDING THEORY AND PRACTICE

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## Anthropology as an Inspiration to Food Studies: Building Theory and Practice

**Abstract**—The aim of this paper is to show the role of anthropological inquiry in the development of a new, interdisciplinary approach to food in culture – namely: food studies. Early anthropologists, for example, Bronislaw Malinowski and Edward Evans-Pritchard, stressed the social meaning of food while analyzing the outcome of their fieldwork. When the functional approach had been replaced by structuralism, the symbolic meaning of food was given priority. Therefore, Claude Lévi-Strauss constructed his famous culinary triangle to show the connection between culture and nature in human thought; however, the triangle was not based on his own fieldwork, but rather many examples from other works were used to support this theoretical approach. This paper shows that without the theoretical and practical contribution of these three anthropologists, the flourishing of food studies as a new discipline would have been seriously delayed.

**Key Words**—culinary cultures, anthropology, functionalism, structuralism, food studies

**F**OOD-RELATED issues have recently gained much interest not only in the media, but also in the academic discourse. Although it is not a brand new topic and culinary cultures have been already described in the earliest anthropological monographs, food was usually treated as a device enabling scholars to examine some other features of a society, not as a central idea. Every single anthropology student have certainly studied classical theories of Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss – and discussed methods used by them. But if we never tried to look at it through the lens of food culture, it is probably because, as Roland Barthes wrote, ‘even – or perhaps especially – to the scholar, the subject of food connotes triviality or guilt’ (1999/1961: 28). However, his opinion was presented in an article written in the early sixties, and since then a lot has changed. The classical ‘mind vs. body’ dichotomy is being overcome and a new discipline emerges. Even if here, in Central Europe, food studies are not well-known yet, we should not forget about its growing popularity in the West, as well as about the presence of incredibly big amount of food-related issues in contemporary mass culture. The academic approach to foodways owes much to the work of early anthropologists

I have mentioned. In this paper I am trying to show how anthropology has contributed to the development of a new, interdisciplinary approach to food in culture – namely: food studies, and in this process it has mingled empiricism with theories.

Maybe it is a truism, but since food is an essential thing in human life, food cultures have been growing and changing along with the development of humanity. Food has many meanings and functions: social, psychosocial, cultural, economical, religious, artistic, metaphorical (Rozin 1999: 22). I am not able to describe all of them in this short article, so I would only like to emphasize that the social function of food is indicated even by the term ‘company’ itself, being coined from two Latin words: ‘com’ – ‘with’, and ‘panis’ – ‘bread’, and therefore referring to a group one shares food with (Rozin 1999: 23). In the late modern era as well as in the traditional societies at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, food was and is being used to construct individual and group identities. Food is entangled in relations of power and gender; it’s also connected with kinship and social structure, so it is no surprise that some elements of food cultures were and are examined by anthropologists.

The article presents the legacy of anthropology which helped to establish food studies as a new discipline. As such, it shows the connection between classical schools of anthropology and modern food studies, and is inspired by the opinion of Ivan Karp and Kent Maynard who noticed that ‘lack of familiarity with our ancestry prevents significant advances in anthropology. An appreciation of the achievements of our predecessors is essential for current thinking’ (1983: 482). At the beginning of this paper, some crucial terms from food studies are being explained. The main part is an attempt to reexamine writings of three influential anthropologists in order to point out that indeed our predecessors have had achievements which should be considered to be a first step toward the development of food studies.

## HUMAN EXPERIENCE WITH FOOD: BASIC TERMINOLOGY

The first association coming to our minds when we hear ‘food studies’ may be dietetics or agro-economics, but

these disciplines are not food studies – simply because food studies ‘is not the study of food itself’ (Deutsch and Miller 2009: 3). Therefore it is necessary to define the main topic of my paper.

The definition I am using here, taken from a book by Jeff Miller and Jonathan Deutsch, states that food studies is ‘the interdisciplinary field of study of food and culture, investigating the relationships between food and the human experience from a range of humanities and social science perspectives, often times in combination’ (2009: 3). Scholars doing food studies come from various backgrounds: history, sociology, geography, psychology, marketing – to name just a few. Food studies emerged some thirty years ago because ‘scholarship is following wider urban middle-class culture, which, since the seventies, has become much more interested in food-related matters of taste, craft, authenticity, status and health’ (Belasco 2008: 6). Since then, topics like globalization, inequality, changes of family structure, tradition, environment and identity have been discussed within this interdisciplinary field. To examine them, a broad spectrum of theories and methods was – and is – being used. In a search for them, food studies have basically no limitations as long as the methodologies and theories are somehow related to food culture.

In the paragraph above I have underlined the main interest of the discipline – human experience with food and eating. If knowledge, feelings and behavior connected with food are the crucial issue for food studies scholars, it should be obvious that the discipline itself has to be grounded in anthropology.

One of the basic terms used in food studies is ‘food culture’; sometimes a synonym – ‘culinary culture’, is also applied. According to Krzysztof Skowroński, food culture is ‘a set of practices, habits, norms and techniques, applied to food and eating’; it encompasses food production, distribution and consumption (2007: 362); it also includes foodstuffs and other material artifacts. Therefore, if food culture is not limited to eating practices and manners, but includes numerous issues connected with our daily lives, it is no surprise that even the earliest anthropologists were writing about it – however, they did not use food studies discourse yet and in most cases food was not their main point of interest, but rather a mean to discover other features of a given society.

There are many anthropological works which include more or less detailed descriptions of various food cultures. I have only chosen three examples and I would like to start with focusing on a book by Bronisław Malinowski – as a representative of functional anthropology; then to briefly present Edward Evans-Pritchard’s research, located on the verge between functionalism and more historical approach. In the third part of this article Claude Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of cooking methods is recalled

#### HORTICULTURE AS FOOD CULTURE. MALINOWSKI’S RESEARCH

Bronisław Malinowski’s trilogy about Trobriand Islanders marked the beginning of the ‘golden age’ of functionalist

approach, and is an outcome of an excellent fieldwork. The anthropologist lived among the Trobriand people for two years, between 1916 and 1918. ‘*Coral Gardens and Their Magic*’ focus on horticulture as a sustenance strategy and the material for this monograph was collected thanks to an application of a new fieldwork method – participant observation, which is also essential in modern food studies. Highly penetrating, detailed field studies are now being taken for granted, but ‘they were entirely unknown to the anthropologists of the nineteenth century, who were content to let laymen collect the facts on which they based their theories’ (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 120). Malinowski was one of the pioneers of participant observation in anthropology and proved that it is a good way to obtain rich, valuable data.

With regards to the Trobriand, this new research method has given the insight into their economy, social system and magic, all of these elements being connected with cultivation of gardens. The Trobrianders grow yam, taro, pumpkin, banana, mango, sugar cane, peas, etc. They are first and foremost gardeners, and ‘neither collecting nor fishing nor domestic animals are sufficient when gardens fail’ (Malinowski 1935: 93). Plants form the main part of their diet, and the gardening cycle structures their sense of time. Crops are used as currency, the surplus becomes a tribute to a chief and a marriage gift. Trobriand Islanders are a matrilineal society, and thus a man, as a legal guard of his sister, is obliged to share his yam with her household in a form of ‘a harvest gift’ (1935: 277–281). As Malinowski writes, ‘gardening, and effective gardening at that, with a large surplus produce, lies at the root of all tribal authority as well as the kinship system and communal organization of the Islanders’ (1935: 101).

Garden plots in Trobriand islands are divided between families; a chief’s garden plot is a model for everybody – a beginning of work in this plant is a signal for all the other villagers to start their work, which has to be preceded by magical rituals. A garden magician performs necessary rites on every stage of gardening work because the magic of gardening is seen as essential condition for success. Malinowski presents a detailed table, containing all magical practices connected with horticulture in the Trobriand Islands (1935: 628–637); but as magic is not my point of interest in this paper, I am not going to describe it here.

What I would like to emphasize is the meaning of food for the society of Trobrianders. The Trobriand islanders divide food into 3 categories: main food (which was yam), light foodstuffs (wild fruits, sugar cane, etc.) and delicacies (all kinds of protein foods: pork, fish, birds, edible larvae). Yam, as their main staple, is also a mean of display. Storage houses for yam and for other crops are an essential part of every village. Only men who are high on Trobriand social ladder may build huge, decorated yam houses; an average man owns a more modest yam house, but still tries to present the vegetables he had harvested in an aesthetic way, forming impressive piles out of it. Yam is a reason behind private conflicts and

a mean of solving them – in a form of gift, given by one village to another (it's the ,butitila'ulo' gift which implies a need to reciprocate; see: 1935: 270). All these occasions in which food is considered to be something more than merely a fuel for human body were examined by Bronisław Malinowski in a traditional society and definitely are present in contemporary discourse about (post)modern food cultures.

To sum up the part about Malinowski's contribution to food studies, the elements of Trobrianders' life connected with food culture should be enlisted once again. First of all, phases of collective, tribal life depended on gardening (1935: 93), so food influences their perception of time. In this horticulture-based economy food is a mean of competitive display and also a source of aesthetic feelings. Obtaining food is strongly entwined with magical practices on one hand, and with communal work on the other. Gifts of food are essential to maintain kinship bonds and the relations of power among the Trobrianders. As Malinowski clearly points out, ,the gardens of the community are not merely a means to food; they are a source of pride and the main object of collective ambition' (1935: 101). His detailed study of gardening, which also includes information about cooking and food exchange, makes us notice the variety of functions of food, which are present not only in the so-called ,primitive' societies.

#### ,BOVINE IDIOM' AND THE NUER'S DIET

Functionalism emerged as an answer to previous approaches – evolutionary anthropology and diffusionist anthropology – and have criticized them for focusing on speculations about historical progress instead of observing present situation in its context (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 120). Although Evans-Pritchard himself pointed out weak points of functionalist approach: creation of speculative, very general 'laws' and crude teleology (according to functionalists, every habit has a social value and helps to maintain social bonds), and finally withdrew his support for this theory (1950: 120), it does not mean that there is nothing worth saving from functionalism.

,*The Nuer. A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*', one of Edward Evans-Pritchard's early works, is an example of this approach and there obviously are some weak points in this book too. For example, no particular relation of a particular man with his ox has been described. Thus, Evans-Pritchard did not develop the notion of intimacy – probably because, as he himself admitted, he had faced serious problems with finding an informant (1940: 14). Not everything can be revealed through participant observation, in anthropological research as well as in food studies. Therefore, data triangulation should be used whenever it is possible. As it is the problem of a method, not a theory, it is characteristic not only for structural functionalism. In spite of that, methodological value of functionalism has been commonly appreciated, and the book about The Nuer certainly is an example of it.

Edward Evans-Pritchard has conducted his research among the Nuer between 1930 and 1936, spending eleven months with these people. The difficulties he faced still await for an anthropologists or food studies scholar while collecting empirical data. Examples include getting access to the group, hostility of members of the group who may sabotage the inquiry, learning the local language, finding an informant, etc. Evans-Pritchard finally managed to solve his problems, ,feel himself a member of a community and be accepted as such, especially when he had acquired a few cattle' (1940: 13). This remark leads us back to the main topic of this article – food culture, because in the thirties the food culture of the Nuer was centered around cattle.

Evans-Pritchard writes that relations between the Nuer were expressed in the ,bovine idiom' (1940: 19), which means that families and individuals are bounded not only by blood ties, but also by cattle. Cattle is being used as bride wealth and bloodwealth as well, and the most common cause of wars which the Nuer fight against other ethnic groups is the desire to capture their herds or/and take over their pastures. Possessing cattle is the ultimate and most prestigious form of showing wealth, and cows are the essential food-supply (1940: 17–50).

However, it is not because of their meat, but rather milk. ,Cows are chiefly useful for the milk they provide' – states Evans-Pritchard. Dairy products (like sour milk and cheese) are the staple foods of the Nuer (1940: 21). Men's main task is pasturing and they are mostly interested in oxen, whereas women (and children) are in charge for milking cows. Evans-Pritchard writes that ,men were forbidden to milk cows' (1940: 22), and so it is visible that food-provisioning and gender-division are closely entwined. The diet also marks the age-group: the Nuer regarded milk as essential for children, whereas adults drunk it more often during the dry season, as a refreshing drink; sheep and goats milk is drunk by small children only (1940: 23–24).

The Nuer grow some crops, like millet, and include wild roots, fruits and seeds in their diet – but first and foremost they are herdsman. Evans-Pritchard noted that upon a cow's death, the Nuer use to say ,The eyes and the heart are sad, but the teeth and the stomach are glad' (1940: 26). These people do like meat a lot, but it has to be emphasized that the flocks are not being raised for slaughter, as it happens in modern food industry. Although the Nuer killed their cattle for food only in the times of harsh famine, they ate all the animals which died of natural reasons. They also used to eat coagulated, roasted blood, obtained during bleedings performed for cattle's sake (1940: 28). Religious obligations were the most common excuse to feast on meat: an animal, killed as a sacrifice for god or for a spirit, was eaten by people. According to the Nuer, a man has no right to kill an oxen, and that is why the Nuer explain their motivations to god and/or to the animal itself before the ceremony of sacrificing it (1956/2007: 322–325). ,Nowhere in the Nuerland were cattle ordinarily slaughtered for food, and

a man would never kill even a sheep or a goat merely on the grounds that he desired meat' (1940: 26).

In spite of this attitude, the Nuer may be called 'the parasites of a cow' (1940: 30), as nearly every part of an animal, dead or alive, has a use value for them: leather, bones, cord, tail hair, horns, dung and urine, blood, meat, and – first and foremost – milk, an essential part of the Nuer diet. A simple family group is not self-sufficient in terms of obtaining it, because of cow's limited ability to produce milk (only after calving) as well as because transferring cattle between groups as a bride-wealth (1940: 25). Thus, milk-based diet required the Nuer to form bigger social groups (villages, tribes). It also enables them to lead half-nomadic lifestyle, 'gives them mobility and elusiveness – because milk requires neither storage nor transport, being daily renewed' (1940: 25).

The importance of cattle cannot be seen only in terms of pasture-based economy. It is true that various resources were obtained by every single family from its cows and cattle has functioned as the most desired form of wealth. But oxen and cow were also treated as a medium necessary to maintain contact with ghosts and spirits; relations with neighbors were shaped according to the possession of herds; and – last but not least – identity of an individual was defined with a strong connection to cattle (Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 16–50). What the Nuer ate, influenced all other aspects of their life, both secular and religious, and it can be clearly seen in Evans-Pritchard's writings. One may conclude that cattle shaped relations inside and outside a Nuer tribe; in micro- and macro perspective. Food production in the case of the Nuer, as well as in the case of the Trobriand Islanders described above, is a key to understanding how this society lived.

#### THE PARADIGM SHIFT: STRUCTURALISM AS A NEXT STEP TOWARD FOOD STUDIES

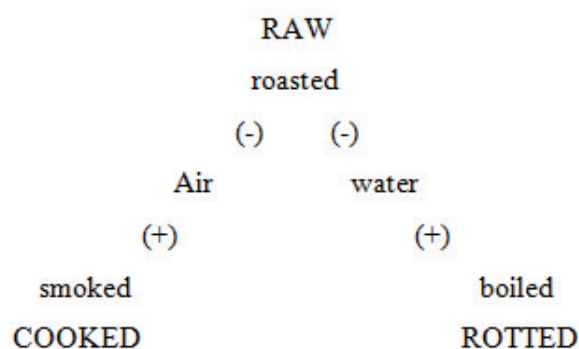
When the functional approach has been replaced by structuralism, the symbolic meaning of food was put in the first place. Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the founders of structural school, has constructed his culinary triangle to show the connection between culture and nature in human thought. The article explaining this idea was published in 1966 and although it is not as famous as Lévi-Strauss' works on myths and kinship, it is definitely worth discussing in the context of anthropology's contribution to the new discipline exploring food cultures.

The triangle was not based on Lévi-Strauss own fieldwork, but rather many examples from other works were used to support this theoretical approach. The author has joined together ideas and behaviors of such distant communities like the ancient Greeks, Indians of Northern America (e.g. the Cree) and of Southern America as well (e.g. Guayaki), 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century French intellectuals, peasants from Central Europe... The underlying idea of his approach (not only in terms of food culture) was that human brain operates according to a 'deep structure', and thus different cultures have in fact a universal background.

I do realize that I am presenting a simplistic explanation of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and thus I would prefer not to go into detail but rather to leave it for the experts from this field and go back to the notion of food culture.

'The questions posed about food and eating from a structuralist perspective have a different emphasis as compared with those posed from a functionalist viewpoint. Rather than focusing upon practicalities and the social processes involved in producing, allocating and consuming food, the structuralist gaze is directed towards the rules and conventions that govern the ways in which food items are classified, prepared and combined with each other' (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 61).

After analyzing various cooking techniques Lévi-Strauss came to a conclusion that seeing the difference between the raw and the cooked as a reflection of the nature/culture opposition is a universal feature of human thinking (1966). That is why a diagram created by him shows a relation between the unelaborated (raw), the elaborated, transformed naturally (rotted) and the elaborated, transformed by culture (cooked).



Obrázek 1. The culinary triangle (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

Food serves as a medium between nature and culture, and the activity of cooking is a transformation, a change, a process of 'civilizing nature'. If preparing food, even in a very primitive way, may be seen as a universal feature of human societies, by the same token thinking based on the opposite terms of nature and culture is, according to Lévi-Strauss, universal (1966: 937). He has suggested including in the diagram the following oppositions: between vegetable and animal foodstuff, between food prepared with and without fat and with or without seasoning, so that the triangle, transformed into a more complex matrix, should include 'all the characteristics of a given culinary system [...] [Then] it can be superposed on other contrasts of sociological, economic, aesthetic or religious nature: men and women, family and society, village and bush, economy and prodigality, nobility and commonalty, sacred and profane. Thus we can hope – writes the author – to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a

society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure' (1966: 940).

The critiques of Lévi-Strauss' triangle point out that his main assumption is unjustified: rules discovered by him in the French cuisine and French language may not exist in other societies. Jack Goody argues that:

,no rationale is provided for constraining the general elements of cooking by geometrical forms, whether triangles, squares, or circles. Their analysis requires a more complex ordering' (1991: 217).

Moreover, ,the structural approach tends to overestimate the unity of cultures' and ,neglects relations between consumption, production and the social-economic order' (1991: 25–27). Peter Farb and George Armelagos write that for example ,Amharic language, spoken in Ethiopia, has distinct worked for the boiling of solids and of liquids' (1980: 105), and so the categories like ,boiled' or ,grilled' may include various range of meals. According to Peter Atkins and Ian Bowler, generalizations made on the basis of habits of primitive peoples are not the best device to describe contemporary food cultures (2002: 6).

In spite of this critique one has to admit that in the short article about the culinary triangle, written in the sixties, Lévi-Strauss managed to touch upon many issues which since then have become ,food studies staples'. These include: social divisions (endo- and exo-cuisine, aristocracy and lower classes), gender and symbolic meaning of food, not to mention the initial topic of his paper: cooking techniques. Because of this inspiring contribution, Lévi-Strauss' structuralism may be seen as one of the cornerstones of the interdisciplinary study of food.

### SUMMARY

Anthropologists were examining food cultures already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it has to be admitted that food itself was not their main point of interests in this time. For example Malinowski, as it has just been said, paid more attention to magic surrounding agriculture in the Trobriand Isles, than to food preparation. However, Sydney Mintz is definitely right when he states that:

,[early] anthropologists were contributing significantly to the study of the relationships between food and ritual and food and social structure. They made studies of fishing, hunting and gleaning, of horticulture and of pastoralism, particularly in societies of the sort once called »primitive« [...] Hence when anthropologists first studied food production, distribution and consumption, they saw these as integral parts of the economic and political order of small systems' (Mintz 2008: 27).

On the next stage of the development of anthropology the structuralists proposed a new approach to culture – and

to food. The work of the three described representatives of these two ,schools' definitely have to be seen as an inspiration to food studies, in terms of topics, theoretical background, and collecting empirical data.

,An anthropology of food and eating cannot ignore fieldwork or go without it' (Mintz 1985). To conduct research focused on culinary cultures, food studies scholars use quantitative methods (for example surveys) as well as qualitative ones (ethnography, narrative, etc.). The subject of food enriched research techniques taken from other disciplines, and in this way methodological repertoire of food studies is constructed. Examples include ,food diaries' – inspired by methods used by nutritionists, and ,culinary chats' – a special type of interview which takes place in a kitchen, when a participant is preparing or eating a meal. This method helps to start a ,evocative conversation about life that might have been difficult to elicit in a traditional (non-food focused) interview' (Deutsch and Miller 2009:8). The collaboration of anthropology and food studies is therefore visible on the level of methodology. Carole Counihan, a contemporary American anthropologists working in the field of food studies, when asked about her opinion on the relation between anthropology and the interdisciplinary studies of culinary cultures, said:

,I think for me, methodologically, I work as an anthropologist. I think in terms of the discipline it's anthropologists really read other anthropologists mainly. Food studies people, we read all of each other. And so I think food studies is fundamentally interdisciplinary in subject matter, in thinking, in theoretical and analytical approaches. So I would say in my methodology I feel really grounded in anthropology. In my thinking I feel much more grounded in food studies' (in: Deutsch and Miller, 2009: 173–174).

Contemporary western food cultures are obviously not the same as food cultures of the traditional pastoral and horticultural, described above. Thus, according to Mintz, ,an anthropological study of contemporary western food and eating may try to answer some of the same questions as are asked by our anthropological predecessors – but the data [...] will differ. Transformations of diet entail quite profound alterations in people's images of themselves, their notions of the contrasting virtues of tradition and change, the fabric of their daily social life' (1985: 5, 13). However, the emergence of new approaches and theories does not mean that the older ones are to be treated as completely useless. Firstly, their achievements and shortcomings have to be viewed in historical context. Secondly, as in the case of structural functionalism, some basic notions and methodology can be still used without accepting the whole theory, if it failed to meet new circumstances

Although food consumption was not a main field of interests for the anthropologists mentioned in this article, I would like to emphasize that food production,

distribution and preparation definitely were not ignored by them. The way they have shown how food is connected with economy, power, kinship and with human thought is still inspiring for food studies. Nowadays specialized disciplines like nutritional anthropology exist and the new field of food studies is attracting the attention of more and more scholars, with research projects being developed, degree programs in food studies being offered and journals about food proliferating. This article has been written to show that if anthropologists had not done some research connected with culinary cultures, food studies would have lacked a strong cornerstone.

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